CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Name:	R. Harwood-Expired CRP to Agricultural Land Classification
Proposed Implementation Date:	Summer 2011
Proponent:	R. Harwood, 89 Harwood Road, Shelby, MT 59474
Location:	Lease #3646, N2, Section 35, T33N, R3E
County:	Toole
Trust:	Common Schools

I. TYPE AND PURPOSE OF ACTION

CRP contract #550B containing 315.30 acres expires on 9/30/2011. The lessee, R. Harwood, has requested to break these expired CRP acres. The CRP acres were offered for re-enrollment, but were rejected by the Farm Service Agency, (FSA). The tract was last farmed in 1988. The estimated acres that will be broke and returned to small grain production is 315.30 acres. The remaining 4.70 acres consists of field boarders. The lessee plans to spray the CRP out in the Spring/Summer 2012 and direct seed the proposed break area to winter wheat the fall of 2012.

II. PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

1. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT, AGENCIES, GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS CONTACTED:

Provide a brief chronology of the scoping and ongoing involvement for this project.

DNRC-Surface Owner
R. Harwood-Lessee
Gary Olson-MFWP
Montana Salinity Control Association
Montana Audubon Society

2. OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCIES WITH JURISDICTION, LIST OF PERMITS NEEDED:

DNRC is not aware of any other agencies with jurisdiction or other permits needed to complete this project.

3. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:

Alternative A (No Action) – Deny R. Harwood permission to break the expiring CRP and return it to small grain production.

Alternative B (the Proposed action) – Grant R. Harwood permission to break the expiring CRP and return it to small grain production.

III. IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

- *RESOURCES potentially impacted are listed on the form, followed by common issues that would be considered.*
- *Explain POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATIONS following each resource heading.*
- *Enter "NONE" If no impacts are identified or the resource is not present.*

4. GEOLOGY AND SOIL QUALITY, STABILITY AND MOISTURE:

Consider the presence of fragile, compactable or unstable soils. Identify unusual geologic features. Specify any special reclamation considerations. Identify any cumulative impacts to soils.

This tract consists of gently rolling topography. The below table outlines the soil types that will be broke.

Slope	Class	T-Factor	WEG	Estimated WW Yield	Acres	Section
0-2%	4E	5	7	39 bu/acre	59.40	35
0-4%	3E	5	5	41 bu/acre	57.60	35
0-4%	4E	5	3	27 bu/acre	1.90	35
0-4%	3E	5	6	38 bu/acre	101.10	35
2-8%	3E	5	6	38 bu/acre	79.20	35
2-8%	4E	5	3	29 bu/acre	1.90	35
8-15%	4E	5	6	32 bu/acre	14.20	35
TOTAL	3E				237.90	
TOTAL	4E				77.40	
TOTAL	BREAK				315.30	

Class 3 soils have severe limitations that restrict the choice of plants and require special conservation practices. Class 4 soils have very severe limitations that restrict the choice of plants or that require very careful management, or both. The letter "e" shows that there is an erosion hazard unless close-growing plant cover is maintained. The class 3E soils have an expected yield of 39 bu/acre for winter wheat are susceptible to wind and water erosion.

The class 4E soils have an expected yield of 32 bu/acre and are susceptible to wind and water erosion. Two of the class 4E soils have a WEG factor of 3 which is lower than the minimum requirement of 4. These soils consist of only 3.80 acres, a very small portion of the tract. The class 4E soils with a slope of 8-15% appear to be mapped incorrectly. They would be more accurately mapped as 4-8% slopes which meet the DNRC's break requirements.

Any erosion concerns for the soils types, WEG, or slopes will be mitigated due to the residue produced not being destroyed by the utilization of no-till farming practices. Clearly, the majority of the soils on this tract meet DNRC's land break requirements.

The last noted practice type was CP-10 which is for already established grass. The reason for initial enrollment in CRP is for increased revenue and due to farming difficulties presented by the utilization of mechanical tillage which destroyed the resided produced by small grain production.

Jane Holzer, Montana Salinity Control Association commented, "Per your July 18, 2011 letter re: potential breaking of 296 ac in N2 Section 35 T33N R3E. I have attached an aerial photo of the area in question. In the NW 1/4 Section there is a dark area that is probably a pothole that was an area of concern - however, there was no evidence of saline in same area in older photo (1991). There are odd markings in the cropland of Section 34, indicating uneven crop growth but MSCA can not identify the reason from the photo. The older and current photos did not show any obvious salinity problems in the 9-square mile area surrounding Section 35, nor in the small watershed to the east. Therefore, MSCA does not see a problem with removing the CRP forage at this time, but care should be taken to maintain sufficient residue cover.

However, in the most recent (2009) aerial photo attached,there is a circled area that could not be cropped in E4 Section 33, just east of the creek. The area could be a potential saline problem or just an area too wet to plant that year - but it is a recent occurrence as it was cropped in all the older photos. I point this out because it could manifest into a saline area with two wetter than normal years 2010-2011 so care should be taken with the pothole region in Section 35 to crop as often as economically possible to use stored soil moisture and reduce surface evaporation - to prevent a saline situation from occurring." (See attached E-mail)
Any concerns over farming this potential pothole or wetland will be mitigated by the use of no-till farming practices. The potential pothole or wetland was surveyed and found to be dry even in this abnormally high rainfall year.

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5. WATER QUALITY, QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION:
Identify important surface or groundwater resources. Consider the potential for violation of ambient water quality standards, drinking water maximum contaminant levels, or degradation of water quality. Identify cumulative effects to water resources.

There are no documented and/or recorded water rights associated with the proposed tracts. Other water quality and/or quantity issues will not be impacted by the proposed action.

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6. AIR QUALITY:
What pollutants or particulate would be produced? Identify air quality regulations or zones (e.g. Class I air shed) the project would influence. Identify cumulative effects to air quality.

No cumulative effects to air quality are anticipated.

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7. VEGETATION COVER, QUANTITY AND QUALITY:
What changes would the action cause to vegetative communities? Consider rare plants or cover types that would be affected. Identify cumulative effects to vegetation.

The existing vegetation is introduced species consisting of primarily crested wheatgrass. The tract was last farmed in 1988. The vegetative community will be altered by the reclassification. The conversion of CRP to small grain production will increase the overall productivity of the tract as the current grass stand has very low vigor.

A review of Natural Heritage data through the NRIS was conducted and there were no plant species of concern noted or potential species of concern noted on the NRIS survey.

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8. TERRESTRIAL, AVIAN AND AQUATIC LIFE AND HABITATS:
Consider substantial habitat values and use of the area by wildlife, birds or fish. Identify cumulative effects to fish and wildlife.

Gary Olson, Wildlife Biologist-FWP, commented, "I have reviewed the Toole County DNRC breaking request #33646 that I received from your office 07/18/2011. As we have discussed previously, any breaking of permanent vegetative cover and conversion to grain will not be positive for wildlife species in general, and specifically problematic for ground nesting birds, mule deer, and antelope populations. Because of those considerations I would ask that the DNRC not allow the tracts to be broken." see attached letter. These concerns will be somewhat mitigated as the proposed action will remove the permanent vegetative cover, but the residue produced in small grains production will still provide limited cover and food for the area wildlife. FWP did not provide any site specific comments regarding this proposed break.

Converting existing CRP acres to agricultural land will decrease wildlife thermal and hiding cover. This reduction of cover may adversely impact various wildlife species including songbirds, upland game birds, waterfowl, antelope, white tailed deer, and mule deer. Agricultural land may provide a limited food source for wildlife species including deer, antelope, upland game birds and migrating waterfowl. No comments were received from the Montana Audubon Society.

9. UNIQUE, ENDANGERED, FRAGILE OR LIMITED ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES:
Consider any federally listed threatened or endangered species or habitat identified in the project area. Determine effects to wetlands. Consider Sensitive Species or Species of special concern. Identify cumulative effects to these species and their habitat.

There are no threatened or endangered species, sensitive habitat types, or other species of special concern associated with the proposed project area. Montana FWP did not provide site specific comments regarding wildlife, (see item #8). At this time, no known unique, endangered, fragile or limited environmental resources have been identified within the proposed project area. The project is a 315.30 acre CRP tract, which is only a very small portion of the total CRP acres held within Toole County.

A review of Natural Heritage data through the NRIS was conducted. There were two animal species of concern and one potential species of concern noted on the NRIS survey: Birds—McCown's Longspur and Chestnut-collared Longspur. Fish-Brook Stickleback. This particular tract of CRP does not contain many, if any of these species. If any are present, they will be dispersed into surrounding permanent cover.

With the use of the USDA-NRCS Conservation Plan, minimum cumulative effects are anticipated.

10. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES:
Identify and determine effects to historical, archaeological or paleontological resources.

Patrick Rennie, DNRC archaeologist, was contacted and he stated that due to the tract being previously farmed, no historical, archaeological, or paleontological resources would be present.

11. AESTHETICS:
Determine if the project is located on a prominent topographic feature, or may be visible from populated or scenic areas. What level of noise, light or visual change would be produced? Identify cumulative effects to aesthetics.

Since the field is currently in CRP and the surrounding tracts are all either CRP, or farmed reclassification as agricultural land will not affect the aesthetics of the area.

12. DEMANDS ON ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES OF LAND, WATER, AIR OR ENERGY:
Determine the amount of limited resources the project would require. Identify other activities nearby that the project would affect. Identify cumulative effects to environmental resources.

The demand on environmental resources such as land, water, air, or energy will not be affected by the proposed action. The proposed action will not consume resources that are limited in the area. There are no other projects in the area that will affect the proposed project.

13. OTHER ENVIRONMENTAL DOCUMENTS PERTINENT TO THE AREA:
List other studies, plans or projects on this tract. Determine cumulative impacts likely to occur as a result of current private, state or federal actions in the analysis area, and from future proposed state actions in the analysis area that are under MEPA review (scoped) or permitting review by any state agency.

There are no other projects or plans being considered on the tract listed on this EA.

IV. IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN POPULATION

- *RESOURCES potentially impacted are listed on the form, followed by common issues that would be considered.*
- *Explain POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATIONS following each resource heading.*
- *Enter "NONE" If no impacts are identified or the resource is not present.*

14. HUMAN HEALTH AND SAFETY:
Identify any health and safety risks posed by the project.

The proposed project will not change human safety in the area.

15. INDUSTRIAL, COMMERCIAL AND AGRICULTURE ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTION:
Identify how the project would add to or alter these activities.

The reclassification of this to agricultural land will increase the vegetative productivity of this tract. The estimated WW yield is 32-39 bu/acre so the average estimated yield is 36 bu/acre. 36 bu/acre X $4.92/bu X .25%=$44.28/acre divided by 2 for 50/50 crop fallow equals $22.14/acre. The current CRP payment is $38.23/acre but will not be sustained as the contract is expiring. The Common Schools trust would see an estimated return increase of $5.52/ac. In addition, the Common Schools trust will receive 25% of the FSA Direct Contract Payment (DCP).

16. QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF EMPLOYMENT:
Estimate the number of jobs the project would create, move or eliminate. Identify cumulative effects to the employment market.

The proposed action will not significantly affect long-term employment in the surrounding communities.

17. LOCAL AND STATE TAX BASE AND TAX REVENUES:
Estimate tax revenue the project would create or eliminate. Identify cumulative effects to taxes and revenue.

The proposed action will increase the tax revenue due to the increased revenue generated in small grain production.

18. DEMAND FOR GOVERNMENT SERVICES:
Estimate increases in traffic and changes to traffic patterns. What changes would be needed to fire protection, police, schools, etc.? Identify cumulative effects of this and other projects on government services

There will be no increases in traffic, no changes in traffic patterns, and no need for additional fire protection, or police services.

There will be no direct or cumulative effects on government services.

19. LOCALLY ADOPTED ENVIRONMENTAL PLANS AND GOALS:
List State, County, City, USFS, BLM, Tribal, and other zoning or management plans, and identify how they would affect this project.

The proposed action is in compliance with State and County laws. No other management plans are in effect for the area.

20. ACCESS TO AND QUALITY OF RECREATIONAL AND WILDERNESS ACTIVITIES:
Identify any wilderness or recreational areas nearby or access routes through this tract. Determine the effects of the project on recreational potential within the tract. Identify cumulative effects to recreational and wilderness activities.

This tract of state land is rural and generally has low recreational value. This tract is legally accessible and the proposed action is not expected to impact general recreational and wilderness activities on this state tract.

21. DENSITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION AND HOUSING:
Estimate population changes and additional housing the project would require. Identify cumulative effects to population and housing

The proposal does not include any changes to housing or developments.

No direct or cumulative effects to population or housing are anticipated.

22. SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND MORES:
Identify potential disruption of native or traditional lifestyles or communities.

There are no native, unique or traditional lifestyles or communities in the vicinity that would be impacted by the proposal.

23. CULTURAL UNIQUENESS AND DIVERSITY:

How would the action affect any unique quality of the area?

The proposed action will not impact the cultural uniqueness or diversity of the area.

24. OTHER APPROPRIATE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES:

Estimate the return to the trust. Include appropriate economic analysis. Identify potential future uses for the analysis area other than existing management. Identify cumulative economic and social effects likely to occur as a result of the proposed action.

The proposed conversion of CRP to agricultural land will greatly improve the productivity on the tract and increase the return to the trust. The current CRP stand has lost its vigor and has very low productivity. This tract was offered for renewal of the CRP contract and was rejected by the FSA. Therefore, converting this acreage to small grain production will provide the Common Schools trust with an estimated return of $22.14/acre. This is based on the expected 36 bu/acre yield, the 10 year average selling price of $4.92/bu, and a 50/50 crop/chemical fallow rotation. No other unique circumstances exist.

EA Checklist Prepared By:	**Name:**	Tony Nickol	**Date:**	August 8, 2011
	Title:	Land Use Specialist, Conrad Unit, Central Land Office		

V. FINDING

25. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED:

Alternative B (the Proposed action) – Grant R. Harwood permission to break the expired CRP and return it to small grain production.

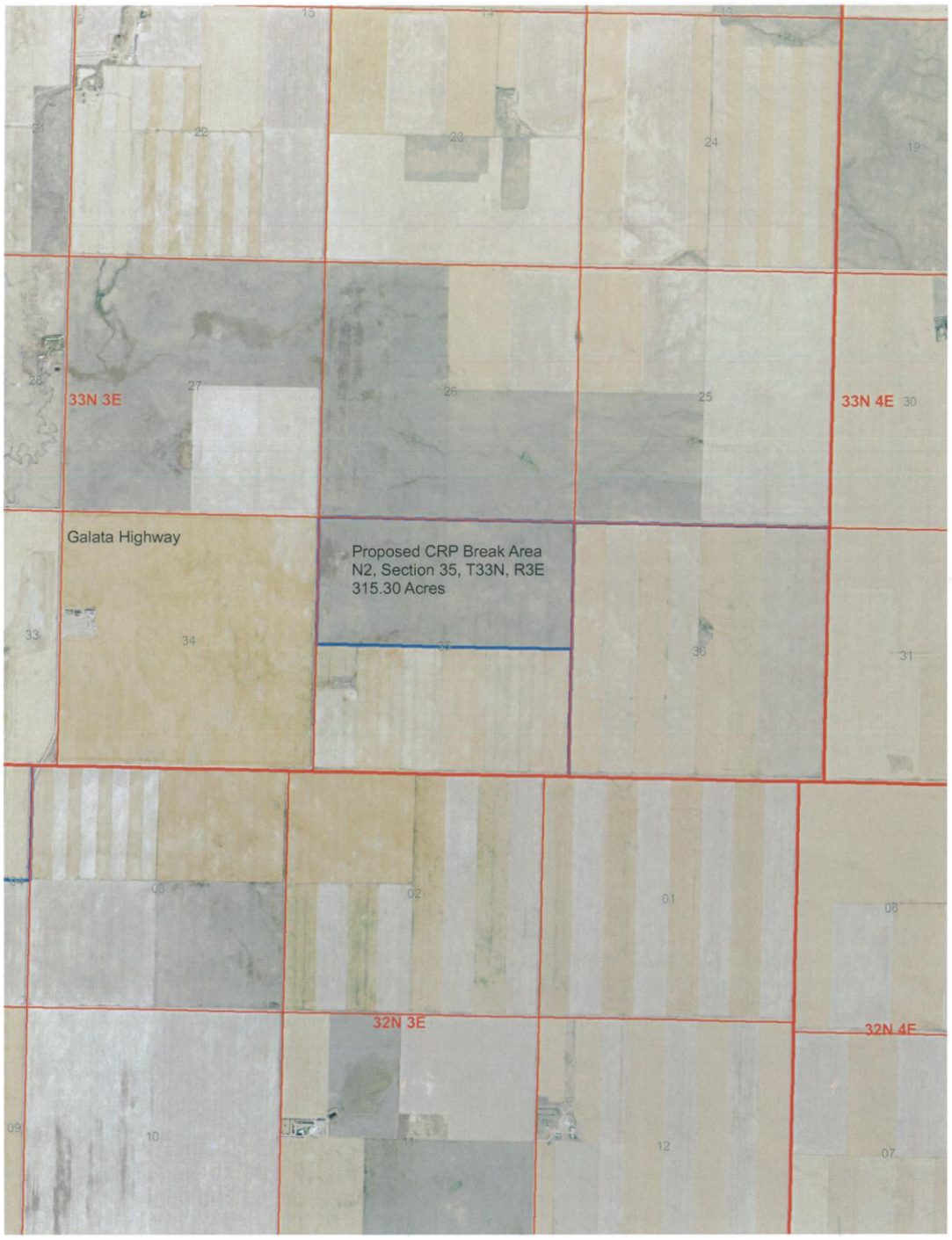
26. SIGNIFICANCE OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS:

This tract of state land is adjacent on 3 sides to productive crop land. Minimal negative impacts are expected with this 315.3 acre land break. The lessees must work with FSA and NRCS and obtain a Conservation Plan and comply with all sod busting regulations. All acres meet current Departmental breaking policy. No till farming methods will be implemented to minimize soil erosion and maximize soil water conservation. Soils are suitable for small grain production. Breaking these acres will help meet TLMD objectives by increasing revenue to the school trust. An average of 36 bu/acre winter wheat or near $22.00 per acre annual return is expected for this acreage.

27. NEED FOR FURTHER ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:

☐	EIS	☐	More Detailed EA	☒	No Further Analysis

EA Checklist Approved By:	**Name:**	Erik Eneboe
	Title:	Conrad Unit Manager, CLO, DNRC
Signature: 	**Date**:	August 10, 2011


33N 3E
33N 4E
Galata Highway
Proposed CRP Break Area
N2, Section 35, T33N, R3E
315.30 Acres
32N 3E
32N 4E

Nickol, Tony

From: Jane Holzer [msca@3rivers.net]
Sent: Thursday, July 21, 2011 12:07 PM
To: Nickol, Tony
Subject: Toole Co Trust Land CRP
Attachments: AR-BC260_20110721_134307.pdf

Tony

Per your July 18, 2011 letter re: potential breaking of 296 ac in N2 Section 35 T33N R3E. I have attached an aerial photo of the area in question. In the NW 1/4 Section there is a dark area that is probably a pothole that was an area of concern - however, there was no evidence of saline in same area in older photo (1991). There are odd markings in the cropland of Section 34, indicating uneven crop growth but MSCA can not identify the reason from the photo. The older and current photos did not show any obvious salinity problems in the 9-square mile area surrounding Section 35, nor in the small watershed to the east. Therefore, MSCA does not see a problem with removing the CRP forage at this time, but care should be taken to maintain sufficient residue cover.

However, in the most recent (2009) aerial photo attached,there is a circled area that could not be cropped in E4 Section 33, just east of the creek. The area could be a potential saline problem or just an area too wet to plant that year - but it is a recent occurrence as it was cropped in all the older photos. I point this out because it could manifest into a saline area with two wetter than normal years 2010-2011 so care should be taken with the pothole region in Section 35 to crop as often as economically possible to use stored soil moisture and reduce surface evaporation - to prevent a saline situation from occurring.

Jane Holzer
Montana Salinity Control Association
PO Box 909
Conrad, MT 59425
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msca@3rivers.net

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DS-252 Version 6-2003

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

07/19/2011

Tony Nickol
DNRC Central Land Office
P.O. Box 961
Conrad, MT 59425

RE: Lease #3646 (N2, Section 35, T 33N, R3E)

Dear Tony,

I have reviewed the Toole County DNRC breaking request #3646 that I received from your office 07/18/2011. As we have discussed previously, any breaking of permanent vegetative cover and conversion to grain will not be positive for wildlife species in general, and specifically problematic for ground nesting birds, raptors, mule deer and antelope populations. Because of those considerations I would ask that DNRC not allow the tracts to be broken.

For future consideration, could you send a location map for these tracts that show general area landmarks, such as towns, highways, etc.? It would save time not having to pull a map out of the map case to figure out where each tract is located.

Thanks for the opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,

Gary Olson
Wildlife Biologist
MT Fish, Wildlife and Parks
514 S. Front. St., Suite C
Conrad, MT 59425
406-271-7033

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